

Book Reviews

Arabian Mirrors and Western Soothsayers: Nineteenth-Century Literary Approaches to Arab-Islamic History

Muhammed A. Al-Da'mi

New York: Peter Lang, 2002. 235 pages.

This is a superb book. With penetrating insight and an eloquent style, al-Da'mi explores the crucial role that Arabo-Islamic history played in the arguments of such prominent British and American "men of letters" as Thomas Carlyle and Washington Irving. The book opens with a preface, in which he lays out his rationale and purpose, and contains seven chapters, in which he develops his argument.

Al-Da'mi seeks to deepen our understanding of nineteenth-century Orientalism by exploring the works of leading intellectual writers of that time: not the professional historians, but the "men of letters" who used history to expound their arguments, but with a kind of literary licence not available to a proper historian. His main argument is that the writers used Arabo-Islamic history not simply as an exotic or a romantic flourish, but rather as an integral and important aspect of their discourses to comment upon their own time. For example, Carlyle praises the Prophet as a heroic leader, as a way to warn the British of the dangers of utilitarianism and materialism; Ralph Waldo Emerson likewise does this to send a message to the young American nation; Cardinal John H. Newman to alert Europe to the Ottoman threat; and so on.

Al-Da'mi convincingly points out that we can neither understand these writers nor the age itself adequately without properly comprehending this aspect of their writings. This is an important rectification to traditional western scholarship, which typically leaves out all mention of anything non-European in its study of its own intellectual history. (Walter E. Houghton's classic work on the Victorian age, *The Victorian Frame of Mind, 1830-1870*, has in its index only one entry for Prophet Muhammad

and none for Islam, although several on Christianity, even though the author discusses Carlyle, Newman, and all the other important “men of letters” whose works al-Da’mi examines.)

Chapter 1 gives background information on the kind of ideas about Islam that the nineteenth-century writers inherited: the stereotypes and myths of Prophet Muhammad as a magician or founder of a heretical Christian sect; Islam as a “religion of the sword” and the Arabs a licentious and violent people; or, from a less hostile perspective, Prophet Muhammad as a brilliant politician who led “enthusiastic” Arabs to victory.

Chapter 2 explores the changes and similarities in the West’s understanding of Islamic history brought about by secularization, new tools of “objective” historical scholarship, and better access to Arabic manuscripts (either in Arabic or a translation). Thus Prophet Muhammad is seen not as the “Antichrist,” but as a founder of a religion that followed in the footsteps of (or borrowed from) Judaism and Christianity. Richard Burton’s Prophet Muhammad is “the master mind of [his] age.” Nevertheless, al-Da’mi points out, the focus was still upon the new religion’s martial aspects, thereby overlooking and ignoring the Prophet’s spiritual appeal. Al-Da’mi puts this down to a “visceral feeling ... [of] fear ... [that is] always ... found at the back of the Western mind in spite of this mind’s various expressions of admiration for, and sympathy with the contemporary Arabs and Muslims.” It is not an exaggeration to say that this fear still manifests itself in the West, most notably since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Chapters 3-6 are deeper studies of several thinkers al-Da’mi singled out: Carlyle, Cardinal Newman, and Irving (twice). This is the heart of the book, mainly a critical précis of these authors’ works and use of Arab-Islamic history to pursue their contemporaneous arguments. My only quibble with these chapters is al-Da’mi’s tendency to shift quickly from author to author, without giving some background context as to who they were and where and when they lived. No doubt specialists will be able to follow him, but nonspecialist readers might be lost, as I was, feeling that the authors under discussion were a bit disembodied.

Chapter 7, “Finale: Perspectives,” is my favorite chapter, as it is here that al-Da’mi frees himself from close readings of the texts to ruminate about their collective significance for both the nineteenth century and for our times. He argues that even though many “men of letters” in the nineteenth century (e.g., Carlyle and Irving) greatly admired Prophet Muhammad and the early Muslims and even corrected some of the medieval miscon-

ceptions about Islam, they essentially left that era's fundamental attitudes intact. For example, while they viewed Prophet Muhammad in a more admiring fashion, they still failed to take Islam "seriously as a revealed religion." In fact, Carlyle viewed the Qur'an as a "kind of wild chanting song." Thus, concludes al-Da'mi, in the end they failed to understand what they read. They concentrated only on those themes of Arabo-Islamic history that could make their own arguments with their contemporaries more persuasive (e.g., the spread of empire, the romantic Bedouin, the despotic sultan, polygamy, slavery, and the like), while ignoring other aspects (e.g., the scientific and cultural achievements of the Arabo-Islamic civilizations, and such intellectual thinkers as Ibn Khaldun and al-Ghazali). Al-Da'mi compares the western use of Arabo-Islamic history as one that can be instructive, but that is essentially a dead history, with that of contemporary Arab/Islamic scholars who see in the same events inspiration for revitalizing a moribund Islamic community.

There is a poignancy to reading this book, as the author is an Iraqi who attempts to contribute to a positive dialogue of civilizations that would serve to bring people together and erase stereotypes on both sides. He obliquely points out to his Arab/Muslim readers that Muslim scholarship should not overlook positive trends in western treatments of Islam. In his preface, he apologizes, inbetween brackets, for not to having the most up-to-date scholarship due to the "absence [in the late 1990s] of incoming publications to Iraq." And as I write this review, the US is bombing Iraq in its "war of the willing." Would that academic scholarship had the ability to build bridges, create dialogues, remove suspicions, and contribute to the flourishing of the global village.

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Dialogue of Civilizations: A New Peace Agenda for a New Millennium

Majid Tehranian and David W. Chappell, eds.

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